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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000045

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SUBJECT: PASTOR BUI VAN BA TO STAND TRIAL

REF: HCMC 000766

1. (SBU) Summary: The Ho Chi Minh City District 11 People's Court will try Pastor Bui Van Ba on the morning of January 13, 2004. Pastor Ba, of the Full Gospel Assembly, is charged with assaulting a police officer in the course of his duties. The charge stems from an August 18, 2003, altercation at an unregistered house church on Lac Long Quan Street in District 11 (reftel). The Protestant community in HCMC is taking steps to draw attention to Pastor Ba's trial. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On the morning of August 18, 2003, police entered a house on Lac Long Quan Street in HCMC's District 11. For at least 18 months prior to the raid, Full Gospel Assembly members used the location as a place to conduct worship services. Although the group is an unregistered Protestant sect, local authorities were aware of the worship services and police had never previously interfered.

3. (SBU) The catalyst for the raid remains unclear. Official documents passed to the ConGen describe the police action in technical terms as an attempt to check the identification documents of those inside the house. Under Vietnamese law all occupants of a given address must be registered with the local authorities and police have the right to enter private residences to check identification cards against registrations.

4. (U) Pastor Ba's wife, who suffers from a heart condition, fainted while police checked the identification cards of approximately 20 individuals gathered for the service. Pastor Ba and his associates sought to take her to the hospital immediately but were prevented from leaving. The situation grew heated and eventually Pastor Ba threw a couple of punches at the police and, as he told ConGen officers, at least one of the punches connected. He was subdued, arrested, and taken to the local police station along with eight other members of his group. Police allowed another pastor to take Pastor Ba's wife to the hospital, where she recovered with no apparent lasting ill effects. The detainees, including Pastor Ba, were released the following day. Pastor Ba is in essence under house arrest pending the outcome of his trial.

5. (SBU) Court documents passed to ConGen by members of the city's underground Protestant community indicate Pastor Ba's trial will take place on January 13, 2004. He faces a charge of assaulting a police officer in the course of his duties. In general the description of the incident in the court documents matches what we have heard from Pastor Ba and others, although the documents make no mention of religion or the unregistered house church.

6. (SBU) The Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, of which Pastor Ba is General Secretary, has issued a written appeal for members to pray for Pastor Ba as he faces the upcoming trial. Post understands a group of local Protestant pastors is circulating a petition on Pastor Ba's behalf that they plan to send to the government. Given recent indications of a more activist approach, there may be additional activities to draw international attention to this case.

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